Nation's Restaurant News

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NEWS

Chef Lagasse opens Emeril's

by Jack Hayes

NEW ORLEANS — The chef who stepped into Paul Prudhomme's blackened kitchen clogs seven years ago at the age of 26 is tiptoeing from Commander's Palace to launch a neighborhood restaurant in this city's gentrified warehouse district in late February.

"This is my life," said Emeril Lagasse, who with his wife, Tari, is spending $500,000 to open Emeril's Restaurant, a 120-seat operation on Tchoupitoulas Street, promising $22 dinner checks — half the average cover at Commander's.

"I'll probably be his best customer," said restaurateur Ella Brennan, who hired Lagasse in 1983 to run the back-of-house at Commander's Palace, which celebrates its 107th birthday this year.

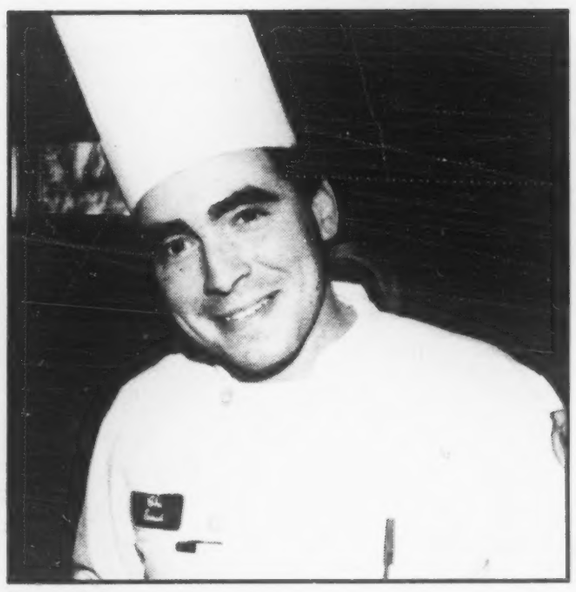
"But we're not going to miss a beat," added Brennan, who said sous-chef Jamie Shannon, a five-year veteran, has filled the executive chef vacancy, while Steven Gundlach, who trained at Brennan's in Houston, is handling Commander's front-of-the-house now. "We've got the depth."

Creating a warehouse ambience with exposed brick and industrial fixtures, Lagasse will stress casual, affordable dining. He will feature cottage-raised local game and seafood and a made-from-scratch kitchen.

Lagasse's new restaurant will serve a Tuesday-to-Friday lunch and dinner Monday through Saturday. A seven-seat food bar, extending from the kitchen, will accommodate single diners and keep the chef in the center of the action.

Lagasse, who became director of operations at Commander's last summer with the resignation of general manager Michael Reiss, had been executive chef since 1983, when Prudhomme exited to start his fame with K-Paul's in the French Quarter here.

Known for modernizing the Creole concept at Commander's, Lagasse oversaw the doubling of the back-of-house staff, to nearly 40. He also chopped the restaurant's 60-entrée menu to fewer than 20 items.



Emeril Lagasse

Columbia seafood sizzles

(Continued from page 1)

erates two Columbia units, The Shrimper also feels the splash of local budget steak houses that are promoting all-you-can-eat seafood buffets on Tuesdays and Fridays.

One of the Sunbelt region's fastest-growing markets, Columbia is bristling with more than a dozen family steak houses, another dozen Mexican dinner houses and more than twice as many Chinese restaurants. In addition, the town has the powerful 12-unit Lizard's Thicket chain and five local Shoney's.

"You can't sell a burger, beer and fries for over $5 in Columbia," said Duncan MacRae, who moves big poundage in $4.89 Southern fried chicken and $4.79 Confederate fried steak at Yesterday's, a 12-year-old neighborhood-style tavern and restaurant in the Five Points district near downtown.

Nevertheless, Applebee's is scouting a third unit here, and T.G.I. Friday's is due to enter Columbia this January, prompting rumors that Bennigan's and Chili's will also open stores in this metro market of 475,000.

Harrell, who moves about 900 pounds of shrimp a week per unit, pinches operating pennies with paper plates, commissary purchases, competitive leases and a hybrid blend of counter-and-table service in his 110-seat restaurants.

Large portions with large value are the secret behind 300 average weekday checks of $6.75, cooked and served by five employees per shift. When shift counts grow to nine on weekends, the covers nearly double also.

"Increase prices 1 percent and your customer counts drop," said Harrell's father, Manning, a partner in seven of The Shrimper's, where food and paper costs range between 40 percent and 42 percent.

To the amazement of Columbia's veterans and newcomers, a 12-year-old family dining chain called Lizard's Thicket continues to fatten in this market despite the abundance of budget competitors.

The locally grown concept serves breakfast signatures like Low-Country Liver Pudding, with two eggs, grits and biscuit, for $2.95, and country lunch and dinner combinations of vegetables and meats for $3.99 and up.

Lizard's Thicket has no qualms about opening new stores within a mile of existing units, and the chain continues mocking the market by making winners out of others' failed sites. Yet Lizard's Thicket knockoffs haven't worked.

"We've been copied down to our menu boards by competitors who aren't around any more," said Anna Williams, who opened the concept with her husband, Robert, and whose seven children help run the business.

Lizard's Thicket features three to five meats and 18 vegetables daily. Nine desserts, ranging from blackberry cobbler to carrot cake — all priced at $1.15 — are listed separately. Children's plates are $2.19.

MacRae, Yesterday's operator who opened just two weeks after the first Lizard's Thicket in 1977, does lunch, dinner and late-night food with midday checks averaging $5.23 and evening checks $8.72.

And MacRae's concept has prospered despite the entrance of Applebee's and some neighborhood tavern independents. A onetime Hilton food and beverage man who learned to cook from his grandfather in Philadelphia, Macrae averages 600 covers a day with only 140 seats.

Pushing harder with food because of shrinking beverage sales, Yesterday's 90-item menu offers five burgers, six American regional plates, eight chicken combinations, six seafood dishes, six Mexican items and six salads.

Caterers get creative with Table for Two

(Continued from page 3)

prosciutto and coated with fresh lime juice and a bit of black pepper. The entrée was swordfish fillet marinated in tangerine and fresh pomegranate juice, accompanied by a side dish with julienne of melon, cucumber and roasted red pepper.

"It's fairly regionally based. It's multidimensional," said Crampton of Table for Two's meals. "It has great color. It's freshly done. It's texturally oriented with no rich cream sauces."

Table for Two tries to be unique not only in its presentation but also in the fact that people don't know what's going to be served until they arrive. Fish dishes are planned a day in advance with game meats planned five days in advance.

Some side dishes may be determined as late as one hour before the day's customers arrive.

The menu is also themed according to the season and the availability of products. In the fall, game meats may be more prevalent than fish, particularly salmon and sturgeon, which is popular in spring and summer. Wild mushrooms and squash will also be featured in the fall. Asparagus, spinach and berries are offered in the spring.

Tomatoes, sweet peppers and baby zucchini are popular in summer.

Briggs and Crampton will take into account a customer's allergies as well as what he or she doesn't like to eat. Requests for preferred dishes will be listened to but not necessarily honored.

"If everyone told us what they want, the fun and mystery would be lost for them and the spontaneity would be lost for us," Crampton said.

That spontaneity is only part of the restaurant's overall charm. Table for Two is located in the front room of a house that was built in 1900 and also home of the catering business.

The cozy room contains an antique marble secretary, where the dishes are kept. An old English armoire holds the wines. Wine or water are kept on a bar by the wall. The lighting is fairly dim, with a floor lamp in one corner, a lamp on the bar and several lights by the armoire to highlight the bar. All other light comes from natural lighting outside. Soft jazz or classical music plays in the background.

Crampton said that although Table for Two is romantic and lunches have lasted as long as five hours, the long wait for reservations has prevented any marriage proposals.

"I think they've had to wait so long it spoils the routine," Crampton said.

Because Table for Two is so minute, food is ordered in small quantities and sometimes on short notice. However, the presence of the catering operation and its larger food requirements make things easier since orders are combined for the two businesses.

"There's such a flow of food through here, it's the advantage of having it tied into the catering business," Crampton said. "They will deliver 1 pound of fish because, over time, we're ordering large volumes of things for catering."

And the demands of the catering business as well as the size of the room also keep Table for Two from becoming Table for More Than Two. Crampton said that lunch is the only meal served because it's more in the flow of the day of the catering business.

CORRECTION

Data in the NRN Stock Index were incorrectly reported for the weeks ended Dec. 15 through Dec. 29. The erroneous information was published in the Jan. 1 and Jan. 8 issues. Corrected data now appear on the Stock Tables page.

The error was made when seven companies were added to the list without making the necessary adjustments. The correct index points are 207.11 on Dec. 15, 208.92 on Dec. 22 and 210.74 on Dec. 29. The following companies were added to the index: Applebee's, Chart House, Eateries, QSR, Rally's, Skyline Chili and Steve's Homemade.

FINANCIAL NEWS

Analysts expect Hilton sale despite reports of low bids

by Alan Liddle

NEW YORK — Hilton Hotels will probably be sold, but at a price much lower than was predicted by Wall Street, analysts said after the company's stock dipped sharply in response to unofficial reports of low bids.

"Between now and the end of the first quarter we would not be surprised to see a transaction," Steven Eisenberg, leisure industries analyst for Bear Sterns, remarked. He said it was "highly likely" that Hilton would be sold in its entirety and that "a legitimate bid will likely be in the mid to upper $90s per share on the low end and from $105 to $110 on the high end."

Though he disagreed about the price, Smith Barney Inc. analyst Joseph J. Doyle said he, too, thought a sale would take place.

"It's a good near-term trade because the stock is undervalued, and we think a deal could be announced [this] month in the low $90s," Doyle said when Hilton shares were selling for $83.

Some analysts had predicted last summer that Beverly Hills-based Hilton, with about 270 hotels nationwide and three casinos, might attract bids of from $120 to $130 a share. Buoyed by such talk, the company's stock, which traded for as low as $48 a share last year, rose to a 1989 high of $115 in August.

Late last month Hilton stock dropped by nearly seven points, to $83, after reports in The Wall Street Journal said that two bidders were offering little more than market value, or $90 a share. The article, attributing information to unidentified "people close to the deal," said that while "at least one Japanese company" is "still in the picture," that foreign firm was not likely to come away with Hilton.

Neither of the company's mentioned as bidders in the article, giant JMB Realty Corp. of Chicago and Miller-Klutznick-Davis Gray Co. of Los Angeles, would comment about the news report or their interest, if any, in the hotel company.

Late last month, Hilton stock dropped by nearly seven points to $83 after reports in the Wall Street Journal said two bidders were offering little more than market value, or $90 a share.

Hilton declined to comment on the article, negotiations in general, the status of its evaluation of alternatives to the sale, which include pulling the company from the market and spinning off the gaming operations.

Addressing the vast gap between the bids anticipated by some on Wall Street and the bids reported by The Journal, Smith Barney's Doyle indicated that recent history might be behind some of the inflated expectations.

"Intercontinental, Westin and Ramada went at multiples of about 20 times [pretax cash flow], but those were strictly hotel operations," he explained. "And in the case of Intercontinental and Westin, there were some well-recognized international hotels.

"Hilton, as it is currently configured, is half a gaming company and half a hotel company. . . . And it doesn't have an international presence — the International [division], by definition, is a separate company."

Doyle also said he believed some Wall Street bulls "went wrong" by "putting big teen and low 20 multiples on the [value] of the entire Hilton operation." Investors, he said, "are not yet willing to pay double-digit multiples for gaming operations."

While Hilton might elect to spin off the gaming business and sell just the hotels to "capture the fat multiples," Doyle said other factors could discourage such a strategy. The "intermediate perspective" of the gaming industry indicates competition could "become intense," he said. "So now might be a good time to think about selling."

Eisenberg of Bear Stearns had some other ideas about the factors shaping Hilton bids.

"I think a lot of people believed several months ago — in an environment where Japanese companies were active in the [United States] real-estate market because of the softness of the dollar — that such [$120 to $130] bids were possible," he said. "But the world has changed a bit since Oct. 13 when the market fell off . . . and the junk bond market fell off."

Eisenberg indicated he would not be surprised to learn that one or more of the bidders for Hilton leaked information to The Journal in an attempt to "do their negotiating through the press."

He characterized the spurt of Hilton stock sales that followed publication of the story as "clearly an overreaction" and observed dryly, "no bidder steps up to the plate with his best offer."

FOOD PRICE OUTLOOK

Christmas freeze boosts prices

by Patt Patterson

The extent of the Christmas freeze through the South is now clearer. Above-ground crops of fresh vegetables in Florida and Texas were badly damaged. Some farmers reported 100-percent loss; others, from 25 to 75 percent, depending upon location. Prices in the Northeast and Midwest are rising on the shortages.

Most of Florida's unpicked oranges were saved by rushing in picking crews and trucking them to orange concentrate processing plants that worked 24 hours a day. Big surpluses of Brazilian concentrate is hoped to moderate or even contain price hikes for concentrate. Fresh-fruit prices are rising.

But estimates of damage to trees run from 20 percent to 40 percent. In recent years Florida has never been able to recover from one freeze before another hits, even though much of its orchard activity has moved into the southern part of the state. Texas growers, also recovering from a previous freeze, have been hit hard. Damage is reported to some grapefruit orchards.

Frozen asparagus prices moved up at the beginning of January.

Heavy imports of frozen broccoli have kept prices stable, even though California's pack is down to about two-thirds of the previous year's pack.

Exports are keeping dry-bean prices up, although the 1989 crop was 25 percent higher than 1988's.

Lent does not start this year until Feb. 28. Expect seafood packers to offer Lenten promotions.

Canned salmon and canned tuna prices have been lower because of larger supplies.

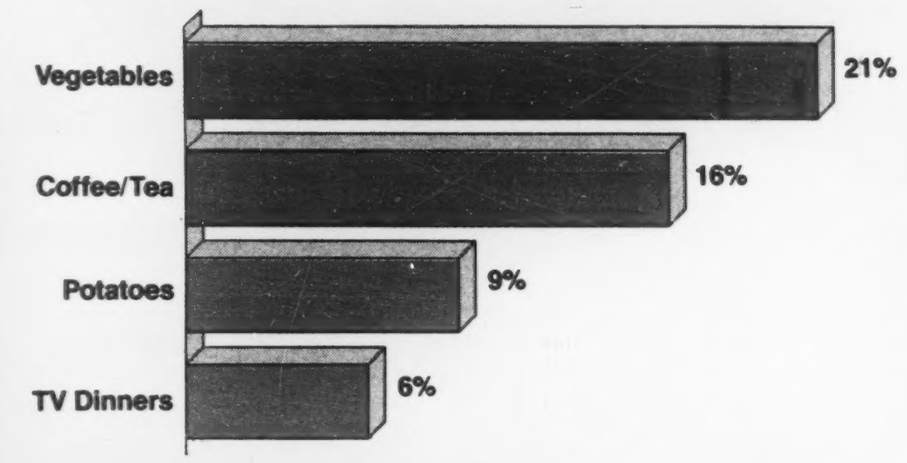
Frozen-fish prices remain high, with cod and flounder imports down.

Shrimp imports through most of last year were level with those of the previous year despite greater demand here. Shrimp prices should move upward to summer.

NRN FACT FILE

A look at the statistics shaping the industry

Foods consumers microwave most often



* Source: National Eating Trends Report on Food Preparation

FINANCIAL DIGEST

Ark reports $43,606 loss for year

NEW YORK — Ark Restaurants said a $308,700 write-off from the closing of its Big Kahuna restaurant and operating losses at four new properties led to a $450,120 fourth-quarter loss, more than double the $209,000 it lost during the year-ago quarter.

Year-to-year fourth-quarter sales jumped 20 percent, to $8.2 million.

Ark blamed the loss on the closing and conversion of the Big Kahuna into K-Pauls's New York and operating losses at that new restaurant and three others opened during the fiscal year — America in Union Station; the train depot in Washington, D.C.; An American Place; and Gonzalez y Gonzalez.

For the year ended Oct. 1, Ark lost $43,606, compared with net income of $848,000 in the prior year, on a 3-percent increase in sales, to $38.4 million.

Ark Restaurants operates 14 distinctly themed restaurants in Manhattan; Boston; and Washington, D.C. The company manages four other restaurants and one bar from which it earned a pretax management fee income of $708,941 in fiscal 1989 vs. $460,870 in the prior year.

Ramada shareholders to get Aztar stock

PHOENIX, Ariz. — Ramada shareholders will receive cash and stock in Aztar Corp., a company formed to operate Ramada's present gaming activities.

The deal is part of a major restructuring program Ramada earlier announced in concert with New World Hotel Holdings Ltd.

When the Ramada-New World transaction is completed, Ramada shareholders will be entitled to receive $1 per share in cash and one share of stock in Aztar for each share of Ramada common stock. They will also receive 1 percent per share in redemption of their preferred stock purchase rights.

Shareholders approved the transaction during a meeting at the Ramada Valley Ho Resort in Scottsdale, Ariz., in early December.

The company has approximately 40.5 million shares of common stock outstanding and about 26,000 shareholders of record.

Horn & Hardart names Garten CFO

NEW YORK — Wayne P. Garten has been named senior vice president and chief financial officer of Horn & Hardart, operator of 83 International King's Table units and 151 other restaurants, including Automats and David's Cookie outlets.

Garten succeeds Gerald Zarin, who is leaving the restaurant industry, the company said.

Before joining Horn & Hardart in 1983, Garten, a certified public accountant, was controller of a Connecticut-based holding company.

Vicorp's posts $9.8M profit in fiscal 1989

DENVER — After suffering a loss of $6.2 million in 1988, Vicorp Restaurants Inc. showed an increase in net income, to $9.8 million, on an 8-percent rise in sales, to $362.6 million, for the fiscal year ended Oct. 29.

For the fourth quarter, the company said net income was $3.1 million vs. a $10.2 million loss in the prior period, while sales crawled 1 percent, to $86.2 million.

Fiscal 1989 results include 52 weeks of operations compared with 53 weeks in 1988 owing to an accounting change, and 12 weeks vs. 13 weeks, respectively, during the fourth quarter. Results also include a $12 million writedown for assets taken in last year's fourth quarter.

The company attributed comparable restaurant sales growth of 9.2 percent to better cost controls and above-average sales gains from units in California and Florida.

Vicorp operates and franchises more than 400 Bakers Square and Village Inn restaurants, primarily in the Southwest and upper Midwest.

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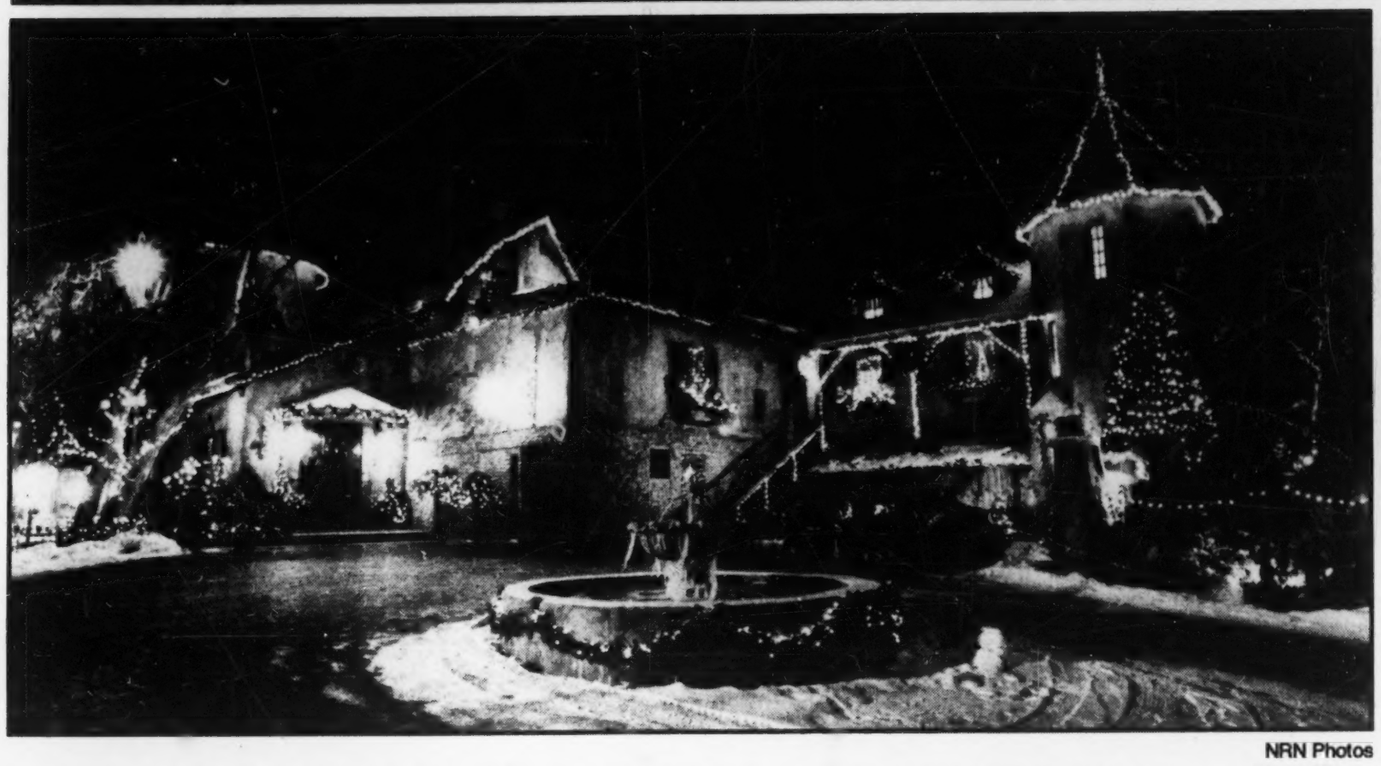
Restaurant News®

THE NEWSWEEKLY OF THE FOODSERVICE INDUSTRY

Vol. 24, No. 4 | Published every Monday by Lebhar-Friedman Inc.; $3 a copy, $29.50 a year | January 22, 1990



NRN Photos

La Caille at Quail Run, a destination restaurant minutes from downtown Salt Lake City that serves Continental cuisine in a French farmhouse setting, glistens at night under a light blanket of snow.

Disney touch packs 'em in at Utah's priciest eatery

by Alan Liddle

SALT LAKE CITY — Situated in a striking re-creation of an 18th century French farmhouse, La Caille at Quail Run, Utah's priciest restaurant, is peddling its No. 1 commodity — romantic evenings — at a fast and furious pace.

The 15-year-old, 310-seat restaurant, which is nestled among a vineyard and lush gardens about 20 miles from downtown, enjoys a per-person average of $58 and annual sales of more than $3 million, management says.

"La Caille is the highest priced restaurant in Utah," says Utah Restaurant Association executive director Ronald L. Morgan. "But they do a whale of a business."

Morgan says that in Utah, theme restaurants with average tickets in the mid teens have done the best job of attracting consumers in recent years.

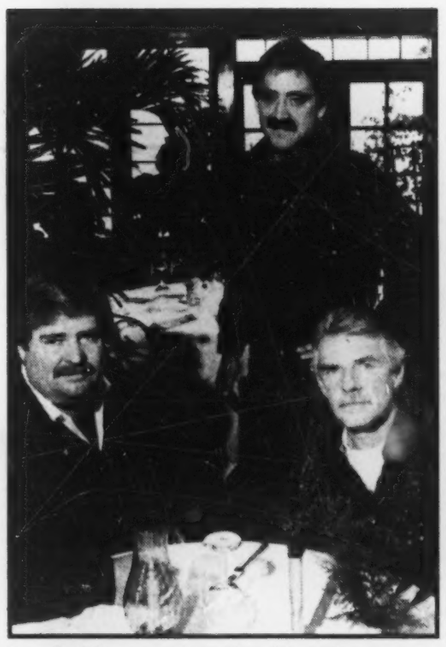
La Caille's ability to sell $20 and $30 entrées supports Morgan's belief that the 15-year-old establishment is "the elite of the white-tablecloth restaurants in our state."

In comparison, The New Yorker Club, one of Utah's best known and most successful fine-dining operations, reports an average ticket of $30 at dinner.

The concept works, insiders point out, because its creator, David Johnson, and his partners, Steven Runolfsen and Mark Haug, strive to captivate customers from the moment they hit the property line — a philosophy they say they learned by studying Johnson's idol, the late Walt Disney.

The restaurant association's Morgan credits La Caille's success

(See LA CAILLE, page 61)



La Caille creator David Johnson, right, with partners Mark Haug, standing, and Steven Runolfsen.

Dairy costs surge; menu prices follow

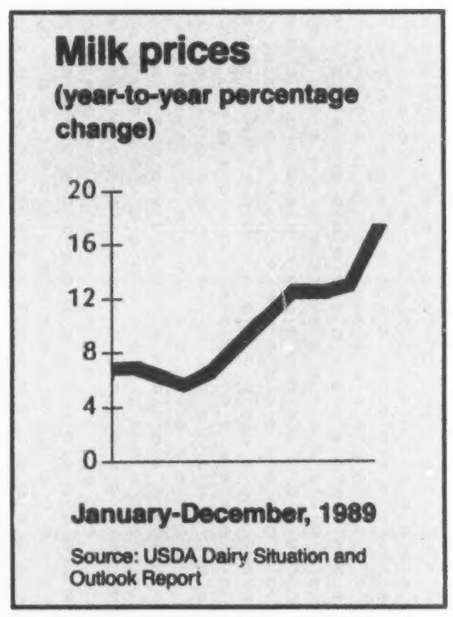
by Milford Prewitt

Rapidly rising dairy and cheese prices are spurring restaurants to raise menu prices and to promote other parts of the menu to stave off margin erosion.

Operators in the pizza, Tex-Mex and ice-cream segments have been particularly hard hit as cheese and milk began soaring in June and have yet to show any sign of leveling off. In December, the wholesale price of milk was 27 percent higher than it was in June and 17 percent higher than prices paid in December 1988.

"We've never seen these kinds of increases before," said Ed Coughlin, director of regulatory affairs for the National Milk Producer's Federation.

Among well-known chains that have opted to raise menu prices or are soon to do so as a result of the inflation in cheese and milk are Pizzeria Uno, the casual-themed, full-service pizza chain; El Chico, the 92-unit Mexican dinner-house chain; and Bresler's Ice Cream and Yogurt Shops, with more than 300 stores.



Bob Brown, senior vice president of finance for Uno Corp., operators of Pizzeria Uno, said the company raised prices 2.5 percent in November alone, more than half of the 4 percent total price hike the company imposed through all of 1989.

Although prices were rising

(See DAIRY, page 60)

Soliman sells Del Taco, Naugles

New owners drop menu prices in bid to revive ailing chains

by Richard Martin

COSTA MESA, Calif. — Thwarted by rival Taco Bell's price-cut-driven sales surge and pressed by debts from his 1988 buyouts of Del Taco and Naugles, restaurant mogul Anwar Soliman has sold the slumping fast-food chains to their four top executives for an undisclosed price.

Backed by GE Capital Corp., the same financial source that initially supported Soliman, the new owners of AWR II Inc. immediately reversed Soliman's marketing strategy by lowering prices at their 289 Del Tacos in California, one in Arizona and 60 Naugles outlets in California, Utah, Neva-

(See SOLIMAN, page 61)

Anwar Soliman

McD cries 'Fowl!' over KFC TV spots

by Bill Carlino

LOUISVILLE, Ky. — Kentucky Fried Chicken has fired an explosive salvo in the market-share battle against the chicken items offered by McDonald's with a satirical TV campaign that has both the hamburger giant and advertising censors for CBS-TV squawking "Low Blow!"

Dubbed "Project M," a pair of 30-second spots casts a nerdish man with red hair and a bright yellow sport coat, identified as only as "Mr. R. McDonald." In the commercials, the bumbling character is interrogated in a mock congressional hearing about the value of McDonald's Chicken McNuggets and McChicken sandwich.

In the first of the two spots, the committee spokesman tells

(See KFC, page 60)

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When you call, an answering machine will ask for your statement. Please tell us your name, the type of operation in which you work and your phone number so that we can confirm your statement for possible publication. But if you wish, you may remain anonymous.

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Subscription rate: Food-service operators and wholesalers/distributors, one year $29.50; 2 years $39.75; auxiliary (consultants, architects, designers, manufacturers, suppliers, schools) and all others: $59.

Nation's Restaurant News (ISSN 0028-0518) is published weekly, every Monday except that last Monday in December, by Lebhar-Friedman, Inc., 425 Park Ave., New York, N.Y. 10022. Second-class postage paid at New York, N.Y., and additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER: Send change of address to Subscription Department, Nation's Restaurant News, 305 Madison Ave., Suite 535, New York, N.Y. 10165-0079.

For change of address, please write Subscription Dept., Nation's Restaurant News, 305 Madison Ave., Suite 535, New York, N.Y. 10165-0079. Six weeks' notice is requested. Please send old and new address and zip codes. If possible, include label.

Vol. 24, No. 4 January 22, 1990

NEWS BRIEFS

Sales flattened; food costs leaped in December

WASHINGTON — Sales growth at restaurants and bars slumped sharply in December while wholesale food prices surged and nearly tied a year-high record.

Sales at restaurants and eating places grew by a slim 1 percent in December from the year-ago month, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, monthly retail sales report.

The 1-percent gain followed a 3.0-percent year-to-year rate in November and a 2.1-percent annual increase in October. The figures are not adjusted for inflation or seasonal trading-day differences.

Prices for wholesale foods rose at a 5.3-percent year-to-year rate in December, the bureau reported, which was second only to July's 5.4-percent pace. In November the Producer Price Index rose at a 4.8-percent rate.

Ritzy's founder seeks control of Treacher's

COLUMBUS, Ohio — Auto Cafe Systems, a company headed by G.D. Ritzy's founder, Graydon Webb, is attempting to buy a majority interest in the Arthur Treacher's quick-service seafood chain.

"We think it's a company that, with an injection of working capital, could be returned to the path it was once on," said Patrick Hickey, Auto Cafe Systems' spokesman. "We have been talking for several months."

Since July 1988 Treacher's has opened 32 new franchised units, mostly in shopping malls, for a total of 100 restaurants, said James Cataland, president. He noted that the company has reduced its losses in each of the last four years.

Illinois passes no-smoking law

SPRINGFIELD, Ill. — Illinois has passed a law that limits smoking in restaurants and public buildings to designated areas.

The ordinance, which takes effect on July 1, allows operators of restaurants with more than 50 seats to determine the size of the smoking and no-smoking sections. Bars, bowling alleys, rooms rented for private functions and restaurants with 50 or fewer seats are exempt from the law.

The Illinois Restaurant Association has lobbied for passage of this version over various other smoking restriction bills that the state legislature had considered and rejected over the last 15 years. Andrew Kelly, IRA executive director, said he especially likes a clause that prevents municipalities from passing stricter laws.

Keller leaves Rakel, which plans to restyle

NEW YORK — Thomas Keller, considered one of the city's most innovative American chefs, has left Rakel, an upscale French-American restaurant in Soho.

Keller, who co-owns the restaurant with Serge Raoul, said he is leaving because Raoul wants to simplify dishes, lower the prices and increase the volume.

"I'm not geared toward doing 250 covers a night," Keller said. "It's not my style." He said he would maintain his equity in the restaurant and added that he does not know what his next move will be.

Raoul, who also owns Raoul's restaurants in Manhattan and Nyack, N.Y., plans to rename the restaurant Le Select and refashion it in the style of an "international grand cafe." Epicus Corp., a consulting group, is assuming management of the restaurant. Stephen Kalt, most recently sous chef at Huberts, is the new executive chef, and Andrew Zimmern, formerly general manager at Isabella's, is the new general manager.

San Francisco proposal seeks written MSG warnings

SAN FRANCISCO — Under a proposed ordinance to be considered by county supervisors this month, restaurants would be required to notify patrons in writing if monosodium glutamate, MSG, is used in the preparation of food.

The MSG notice proposal was put forth by supervisor Wendy Nelder, a veteran board member who has successfully championed other measures relevant to the restaurant industry, including San Francisco's non-smoking section law. A Nelder aide said research shows that MSG can cause a variety of health problems, including headaches and swollen glands, in a large number of people.

Officials of the Glutamate Association, a trade group representing MSG producers, dispute Nelder's contentions about widespread health risks, if any, posed by MSG and oppose the notification requirement.

Taco John's asks competitors to join co-op

CHEYENNE, Wyo. — Taco John's International, operator of 452 fast-food Mexican restaurants in the United States and Canada, said it is attempting to create a purchasing co-operative for Tex-Mex restaurants.

The 110-unit Taco Bueno and 93-unit El Chico chains, both of which are based in Dallas, have expressed interest in the co-op, said R. Brent Murray, Taco John's vice president of purchasing and distribution. At least eight other Mexican chains have been contacted.

Taco John president and chief executive Rex Washburn initiated the project to lower participants' supply costs.

Jacobs requests more time to buy Restaurants Unltd.

SEATTLE — E.S. Jacobs & Co., the New York investment company seeking to buy restaurant-operator Restaurants Unlimited Inc., has asked for an additional three months to finalize arrangements for the proposed friendly takeover, according to RUI chairman Richard Komen.

Komen said both parties remain "committed" to the deal, which would leave Restaurant Unlimited's management with their current jobs and a minority interest in the company. But Komen said that Jacobs officials would not be able to complete the transaction until the end of March.

"Everything is on track," asserted Robert Nowlin of E.S. Jacobs. "We're in the process of putting financing together."

LA considers residential ban on catering trucks

LOS ANGELES — Representatives of the county's 5,000-truck mobile catering industry said they would fight Los Angeles city proposals to ban restaurant vehicles from residential neighborhoods, limit stops to 30 minutes and boost fines.

The City Council is expected to consider the half-hour-stop limit this month. About 50 independent operators recently drove their catering trucks around City Hall and picketed there to protest the proposals, which were prompted by complaints about road hazards, sidewalk obstructions and drinking by unruly patrons.

Legislators tackle 'backhauling' issue

WASHINGTON — A House subcommittee is drafting legislation to prevent shippers from using empty food transport vehicles to cart hazardous materials.

"We heard guys tell us that they'd haul a load of milk, wash out the tank and then haul a load of hydrochloric or sulfuric acid — in the same tanks," said Dave Springer, a legislative assistant for Congressman Thomas Manton, a New York Democrat.

The practice, known as "backhauling," has been spotlighted in a flurry of news reports. However, distribution experts have asserted that the danger is almost unknown in foodservice.

California mandates nutrition rules for school meals

SACRAMENTO, Calif. — California has become the first state to mandate restrictions on the amount of fat, saturated fat and cholesterol in school meals.

The law, enacted Jan. 1, requires the establishment of nutritional guidelines for all foods and beverages sold at elementary and high schools and requires educators to select food purchases on the basis of lower fat and cholesterol contents.

"Throughout the nation our kids are showing unprecedented risk factors for heart disease that include elevated levels of cholesterol, obesity and high blood pressure," said Assemblywoman Jackie Speier, D-San Mateo/San Francisco, who authored the legislation after finding corn dogs and greasy potatoes on the lunch menu of a grammar shool in her district.